

Fully Alive: Wrath

In my late teens and early twenties, I believed I was a really chill person. That I had received Christ's peace that surpassed all understanding. My levels of chill were confronted firstly in marriage, and then seriously put to the test with parenting. In response to a temper tantrum, I once went to push a door out of the way with a fist, only for the solid native timber door on new carpet to not give way, breaking my fifth metacarpal on my way to a vestry meeting. That makes me sound far angrier than I was, but it certainly was an act of frustration.

Parenting exposed the fact that I wasn't without anger. I had simply learned to hide it, even from myself. Who can relate? Due to my childhood experiences, I had vowed I would never get angry as father. What that meant in practice was a denial of my anger and a failure to attend to the rising inner thermometer gauge until I was at the point of eruption. This all came to a head in 2020. We had been in Auckland just over a year, and then we all went into lockdown. I remember calling a friend on the day of the announcement, saying, I don't think I can do this. Lockdown exposed the depths of anger in me, and I would mostly end up angry at myself for getting angry. A vicious cycle.

Working on my anger became a personal focus that year. I believe I made progress, though sometimes I wonder if parenting just got easier! Just these holidays, Sienna and I were flipping through some "strengths" cards. I had got her to place the strengths in piles based on how much she thought she had them. Then she wanted me to do mine. We got to patience, and I went to put it on the pile of strengths I had, and she just gave me this look, and said, "Mum's patient." She conceded that I've improved, but that it should still go on the room-for-improvement pile.

There are so many directions for exploration of anger, and its sinful expression wrath. But I want to focus this morning on that underground anger we often don't allow ourselves to see. We can all see the harm of explosive anger, of the short fuse, but what about the simmering internalised anger? The anger we don't acknowledge because it flies in the face of who we are trying to be?

Internalised Anger

Many of us carry a belief that showing anger is bad, so we internalise and repress it instead. We might not think we have a problem with anger because we're rarely visibly angry. But inside we're simmering - resentful, bitter. Resentment left unchecked grows into bitterness, hostility, grudges, and hatred.

Why do we do this? Often because anger threatens a self-image that we're protecting - competent, patient, chill, the person who has "received Christ's peace." Andrew Lester writes in *Coping with Your Anger* that an important part of our self-esteem is tied up in how we imagine others see us, so when something threatens that 'glittering image' - a failure, a criticism, an embarrassment, criticism - we

feel a sweep of anxiety. The more unrealistic our ideal sense of self, the more likely we are to fall short and feel angry. Internalising the anger can feel safer than admitting the gap between the self we're presenting and the self underneath.

Genesis 4 – The Warning Light

Anger appears right at the beginning of Scripture's account of sin in Genesis 4, where sinful anger is pictured as a ravenous beast desiring Cain's flesh. God says to Cain: "sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." God does not rebuke Cain for feeling angry but warns him about what will happen if that anger goes unattended. Anger as a revelatory emotion is morally neutral. It becomes harmful when we dwell on it, nurse it, and allow it to guide our actions. Anger left unchecked turns into the sin of wrath. Paul says in Ephesians, "In your anger, do not sin. Or another translation "Don't sin by letting anger control you. And don't let the sun go down on your anger, for anger gives a foothold to the devil." (Eph 4:26-27). This is an invitation to process and find healthy ways to express the emotion so that it does not take root in our hearts and minds; developing into resentment, bitterness and wrathful hatred.

Anger itself isn't the sin, but what we do with it that turns it into wrath. Anger is like an engine warning light on a car. A car engine light coming on when going up a hill letting you know the engine is overheating. The hill you're climbing isn't the problem; it's what exposes the problem, it reveals that something under the bonnet needs attention. Anger management says: I should avoid hills. God wants to get to the heart of the issue. We might say that such and such a person or situation made me angry. But the circumstances don't cause the anger, they are the occasions that reveal something deeper. God's warning to Cain comes before judgment, as a merciful invitation to look under the bonnet while there's still time.

Two questions are worth asking when the warning light comes on. First: where is it aimed? Is the target of our anger the actual source, or are we misdirecting our anger? Often, we lash out at whoever's nearest (a spouse, a child) because the real target of our anger: a boss, a circumstance, God, is out of reach. Second, is it proportional? Is the size or duration of our anger match what's happened? Or are you drawing on a stockpile of internalised anger that's been building for months? Anger that's misdirected or wildly out of proportion isn't usually about what just happened at all, and an indication that we are in wrath territory without even knowing it.

Nothing is quite so revelatory of what we're protecting, and what idols we've made of otherwise good things, as anger. What has struck me throughout this series is how much each of the "deadlies" reveal something deeper, something going on beneath the surface. Perhaps we are genuinely angry about some injustice, but it also might reveal that the 'good' my anger is defending is my agenda, my control,

my dignity, my cherished reputation, my high expectations. Like Chris said last week with lust, it might reveal another way we try to avoid pain, protecting ourselves not with a sexual distraction or numbing but with a sense of power and control. Internalised anger is what happens when we ignore the warning light.

Colossians 3 – Already Dead

So what makes it possible to acknowledge the warning light, and look under the bonnet, without fearing what we will find there? Paul writes to the Colossians: "you have died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." A few verses later he says: "put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature," anger, rage, malice among them. Your life is already hidden, already secure in Christ, therefore you're free to put to death what doesn't belong. If our standing depends on managing our own image, then looking honestly at our anger is too dangerous, better to bury it. But if our life is already hidden with Christ, hidden anger has nothing left to protect, we can afford to look under the bonnet.

I appreciate that this gospel idea—that we are already dead and hidden in Christ—is rather abstract. But it has profound practical power. When I reflect on this passage, the traditional proclamation at the death of a monarch comes to mind: "The king is dead, long live the king!" I have used this in my prayers and journal. It just occurred to me when I was praying once, to proclaim 'Jeremy Woods is dead, long live Jeremy Woods!' In repentance I can come before God, acknowledging that I am dead. Whoever I was yesterday, or this morning, or five minutes ago, the one who out of fear propped up a glittering image, the one who overate to numb the shame, the one who bought something that wasn't necessary, motivated by a dull sense of emptiness, one who used lust to escape a sense of meaninglessness and emotional dis-connection, that person is dead in Christ. That in serious repentance, we are reborn. That the garments we clothe ourselves with—compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness—are not virtues we perform to counteract the deadly sins, but beautiful baptismal garments of the new self, that is "being renewed in mind in the image of its Creator." To continue putting to death these things is saying yes to the Master Mechanic, who is restoring us. Saying yes to popping the bonnet and letting him have a look. To courageously face whatever the thing the anger is trying to protect.

Mark 3 – Jesus' Anger

What about Jesus? Jesus got angry, didn't he? People will often cite Jesus flipping the tables, and this idea of righteous anger. Our gospel reading gives us the only place in the gospels where Jesus is explicitly said to be angry. What do we see? He's grieved at the hardness of the hearts around him: people more concerned with rule-keeping than with a man's withered hand being healed. Jesus

doesn't suppress that anger, and he doesn't let it simmer in resentment either. It moves him immediately into an act of mercy. He's certainly not people pleasing, but he is acting in love and justice. He heals the man, in front of the very people whose hardness provoked him.

That's the alternative to internalising anger: not suppression, not eruption, but anger acknowledged and directed by love. Clearly, there's a place for proportionate anger that's rightly ordered. But this is a high bar. None of Jesus' anger is self-serving but targeted towards injustice experienced by others and has love at its root. The virtue of gentleness defines his overall character. I personally haven't experienced anger that clears that bar. For the rest of us, James writes: "human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires." Anger is a good emotion signal as a warning light, but a disastrous habit. Brene Brown says of anger, it's "a powerful catalyst but a life-sucking companion."

Moving towards fully-aliveness

Throughout this series, we have been exploring how the "deadlies" get in the way of us living into Jesus' promise of life fully alive. Being fully alive means to have a healthy expression of anger, acknowledge, allow it to bring us to action, to attend to what is going on 'under the bonnet' and then let it go. To put on love. To show compassion to others and ourselves. To be patient with those who frustrate us. To forgive those who wrong us. Anger cultivated into wrath diminishes our souls, it disconnects us from God, with one another. It robs us of the peace that Jesus promises. It affects us physically.

When the Psalmist says, refrain from anger, abandon wrath and do not fret, it can only bring harm, this harm includes the harm that we are doing to ourselves. But reading the Psalm in context puts it all within a framework of God's ultimate justice. We can hold our anger against injustice loosely because we trust the Lord to deal with it; "commit your way to the Lord, trust also in him." The command to abandon anger is not an invitation to suppression. But acknowledgement and release into the hands of God. A God we can trust to be righteously angry against all injustice.

This week, when the warning light comes on, try noticing it. What it's protecting? What really is the core issue under the bonnet? Can you invite our Divine Mechanic to take a look, and reveal to you what is the real issues that need healing?